



Greed and grievance: the role of economic agendas in the conflict in Solomon Islands

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This article investigates the applicability of the influential economics of civil war literature to the case of the conflict which occurred in Solomon Islands between 1998 and 2003. It is argued that a modified version of the greed thesis resonates with particular aspects of the situation in Solomon Islands, particularly during the latter phases of the conflict when a variety of actors, including politicians, businessmen and ex-militants, were clearly benefiting from the instrumentalisation of violence and disorder. The underlying causes of the conflict have much to do with historical patterns of uneven development which have created overlapping boundaries of social-economic inequality and ethnicity. As is the case with other recent armed conflicts in Melanesia, issues of land, identity, ethnicity and socioeconomic justice were central to the conflict.

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Since the late 1980s, development economists have become increasingly involved in the field of conflict studies. An influential literature has emerged which argues that economic motives are the primary drivers of contemporary civil wars. According to econometric modelling, civil wars are statistically most likely to occur in countries with a high dependence on the export of primary commodities, a high proportion of poorly educated young men in the populace, and slow economic growth (Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 1998, 2001). The

argument is that young men are motivated to rebel by the opportunity to predate on lootable primary resources, and also by the opportunity cost of not doing so. Greed, rather than grievance, is regarded as the main motivational force behind conflict. The so-called 'greed' thesis has generated considerable debate amongst social scientists. A nascent 'beyond greed and grievance' literature acknowledges the importance of economic agendas in civil wars, but widens the narrow analytical lens of neoclassical economics to include



consideration of political, cultural and historical factors and contexts (see Cramer 2002; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Pearce 2005). This emergent literature is also placing small wars in the context of weak and failing states, and wider processes of globalisation. In this broadened perspective, state and commercial actors are also viewed as potentially important conflict actors.

The socioeconomic characteristics of Solomon Islands, with its dependence on primary commodity exports and its large demographic youth bulge, make it an ideal candidate for a greed-driven conflict or 'resource war'. The objective of this article is to examine the relevance of the economics of civil war literature in the case of the recent conflict in Solomon Islands.

This conflict commenced in late 1998, when Guadalcanal militants, collectively known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), set about a violent campaign of harassment which saw the eviction of large numbers of migrant settlers from their homes on the Guadalcanal Plains and around Honiara, most of whom originated from the densely populated island of Malaita. A rival militant group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), formed between late 1999 and early 2000. Comprising ex-policemen, men who had been evicted from their homes on Guadalcanal and so-called 'angry young men' from the streets and settlements of Honiara, the MEF formed a 'Joint Operation' with the paramilitary Police Field Force and, in June 2000, staged a *coup d'état* after raiding the national armoury. Whilst the fighting escalated dramatically after the coup, the military-style armed conflict effectively ended with the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement in October 2000. However, the Agreement did not bring about peace as low-level violence and lawlessness continued to characterise various parts of the country, particularly Honiara and the remote Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, until the

deployment of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2003.

It is argued that, with significant modification, elements of the greed-driven model of conflict resonate with particular aspects of the conflict in Solomon Islands. A range of actors, including ex-militants, politicians and Honiara businessmen, benefited financially from the violence and disorder, particularly during the post coup phase of the conflict. Much of the economic gain flowed directly from government coffers as a consequence of the pervasive corruption of the compensation and demobilisation processes. Under these circumstances, it is the state, rather than 'lootable' primary resources, which is the subject of predation.

However, the greed thesis cannot provide a solely satisfactory explanation for the origins and dynamics of the conflict in Solomon Islands. The assumption that individuals will always behave in a rational and benefit-maximising way obscures important social and cultural influences on individuals' motives for participating in collective violence. The comparative regional literature encourages us to see socioeconomic inequality and ethnicity as potent drivers of conflict in Melanesia,¹ particularly in situations where socioeconomic cleavages coincide with the fluid and pliable boundaries of ethnic identity. As has been the case with the armed rebellions in Fiji and Bougainville, it would appear that ethnicity became polarised around underlying issues of socioeconomic justice, particularly concerning the distribution of the benefits of development. Moreover, the largely geographically based socioeconomic inequalities which have developed between and within groups in Solomon Islands have roots stretching back to the early contact period, and were further reinforced during the British protectorate period. After the Second World War, expressions of island and

area-wide ethnic solidarities emerged as a means to voice grievances concerning perceived injustices at the hands of the colonial administration. The list of grievances has expanded since independence in 1978 to include widespread dissatisfaction with post-colonial governments, which have overseen corruption, mismanagement and wastage, particularly in the lucrative forestry sector, and have failed to deliver services to the rural populace.

Greed and grievance: neoclassical economic models of intrastate conflict

The 'greed and grievance' approach has been developed by Paul Collier and his World Bank colleagues who classify numerous possible 'causes' of civil war under two broad headings: 'greed', meaning the pursuit of profit; and 'grievance', meaning the redress of injustice (Collier and Hoeffler 1998, 2001; Collier 2000). They analysed data on internal conflicts during the period from 1965 to 1999 against a range of economic, demographic and socio-cultural variables to determine which variables were most closely associated with the occurrence of civil war. Their general conclusion was that 'objective grievances', such as inequality, political repression and ethnic and linguistic divisions have little bearing on the likelihood of the outbreak of conflict. By contrast, 'economic characteristics', particularly dependence on primary export commodities, a high proportion of poorly educated young men, and slow economic growth, are powerful predictors of civil war. The reasoning is that rebel groups are motivated to wage war in order to profit in a material sense through the capture of lootable primary resources or trade networks, a process described as 'predation'. More recently, Collier and Hoeffler (2001) have presented a weaker

formulation of the greed thesis, downplaying the role of motive in favour of a focus on the 'opportunity for rebellion'.

The work of Collier and his colleagues resonates strongly with the 'resource curse' literature. Numerous studies suggest that states that depend heavily on the export of natural resources, particularly oil, gemstones and minerals, tend to suffer from a variety of conditions including slow economic growth, high poverty rates, high levels of corruption and authoritarian governments (see Ross 2004 for a summary of these studies). Other studies, including those by Collier and his colleagues, link at least one of these resource curse conditions with the incidence of civil war. Ross concludes that the 'effect of natural resource dependence on conflict may be part of a larger phenomenon: the resource curse' (Ross 2004:350).

The greed thesis also resonates with the literature concerning the relationship between youth bulges and conflict (see Urdal 2004). This literature, which is also influential within World Bank policy and research circles, sees demographic factors, particularly the presence of large youth cohorts, as the primary predictors of domestic armed conflict. The risk of conflict is said to increase when youth bulges occur in the context of economic stagnation and limited options for out-migration. However, as is the case with the neoclassical economics models of civil war, precise causal mechanisms remain unclear.

While the youth bulge hypothesis in general is supported by empirical evidence, the ways that youth bulges influence conflict propensity still remain largely unexplored empirically (Urdal 2004:16).

Two possible causal relationships are proposed in the youth bulge literature. The first focuses on unemployment, resulting from oversupply in the labour market, as a cause of grievance for young people.



Grievances are intensified by the raised expectations of youth brought about by expanded educational opportunities and their inability to influence or participate in the political system. The second causal relationship is Collier's 'opportunity for rebellion' model, which sees unemployment as increasing the opportunity cost of not rebelling. In other words, faced with no option but unemployment and poverty, young people are likely to seek income-earning opportunities through participation in rebellion. Whilst Collier sees close linkages between poorly educated youth, unemployment and conflict, Urdal argues that higher educational levels actually produce youth grievances, particularly in developing economies that are unable to absorb a rapid increase in well-educated youth.²

Greed and grievance in Melanesia

The lexicon of greed and grievance has well and truly entered the debate concerning the causes of armed conflict in Melanesia, including Solomon Islands. Indeed the socioeconomic characteristics of Solomon Islands, West Papua, and Papua New Guinea entice the application of the resource war and greed-driven models of conflict. Commentators are divided, however, as to their relevance in the particular context of Melanesia. For some economists, a modified version of the greed thesis provides the best model for explaining armed conflict throughout the 'arc of instability'.

The civil unrest derives from competition for the natural resources in an environment of weak states and hence poorly designed and enforced property rights, and moreover, the large pool of under-employed provides ample scope for the creation of grievances to back up the claim for resources (Duncan and Chand 2002:1).

For others, the greed thesis provides a largely unsatisfactory explanation for particular conflicts in Melanesia. Regan applies the greed and grievance framework to the case of the Bougainville conflict and finds it to be inadequate in two key regards. First is the fact that the motives of Francis Ona and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) could not be regarded as greed: '...the key issue for Ona was socioeconomic justice' (Regan 2003:156).³ Second is that, aside from some looting of mine assets at the start of the rebellion, the rebels did not 'predate' upon the mine and mining wealth did not prolong the conflict. Indeed, part of the rebel's agenda included permanent mine closure.⁴ Regan finds that Ross' (2003) hypothesis concerning the relationship between separatist conflicts and 'unlootable' natural resources is more helpful in explaining the origins of the Bougainville conflict

...the grievances of local people—both landowners and semi-skilled mine workers—to receive a 'just' share of the mine revenue triggered acts of violence that precipitated the conflict (Regan 2003:157).

Looking again at Melanesia more broadly, Banks argues that whilst the Melanesian countries 'conform to at least some of the explanations linking resources and conflict' the resource war models are ultimately unhelpful (Banks 2005:188). Building on research in anthropology and human geography, mostly from Papua New Guinea, Banks prefers to see resource conflicts in Melanesia (defined as conflicts which occur around resource developments, particularly mines) as 'more centrally about the changes that occur in relationships between individuals, groups and local environments' (Banks 2005:190). Four particular processes are identified which increase the potential for resource conflict to occur. These relate to the relationship between land and identity; the altering of regional



notions of balance and association; the disruptive social impacts of in-migration; and intra-group conflict concerning distributional issues (Banks 2005). All of these social and cultural factors are clearly important in the case of the conflict in Solomon Islands.

Greed and grievance in Solomon Islands

The socioeconomic characteristics of Solomon Islands are perfect for greed-driven conflict. Primary resources, particularly raw logs and fisheries, have accounted for 30–40 per cent of GDP since the early 1990s (Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2004); and, in 1999, the time of the most recent census, 41 per cent of the population were under the age 15 (de Bruijin 2002). Several commentators have highlighted the applicability of the economics of civil war literature to the conflict in Solomon Islands. McDougall, for example, rejects the importance of economic agendas in the Bougainville conflict, but finds that they were important in the Solomon Islands' case

...it is also clear that various individuals and groups benefited from the breakdown of the state in that situation: rogue elements in the police, certain businessmen and politicians, local militia leaders such as Harold Keke on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal (McDougall 2004:352).

Indeed, there is a strong consensus in the academic literature on the conflict that economic agendas were clearly evident in the post-Townsville Peace Agreement phase of the conflict (in particular, see Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2004; Moore 2004). Ex-militants, particularly from the MEF, became indistinguishable from criminal gangs; and both ex-militants and politicians benefited from the abuse of the compensation and

demobilisation processes and had vested interests in the prolongation of the lawlessness and disorder. It is also known that selected local business houses were awarded duty remissions and tax exemptions during this period (Dinnen 2002), and it is alleged that the backroom dealings also extended to the issuance of new logging concessions to Asian companies.⁵ In these circumstances, the state itself becomes a lootable resource to be predated on by a range of conflict actors.

Opinions differ concerning the motives behind the coup of June 2000. Some regard it as the outcome of then Prime Minister Ulufa'alu's failure to manage the situation that had developed over the preceding 20 months or so, particularly in regard to compensation, and his inability to 'play the political game' more broadly. Others see the coup as either an opportunist or premeditated attempt to seize power for the explicit purposes of economic gain. Chand presents what he describes as a 'stylised model' of the source and dynamics of the conflict in Solomon Islands.

A genuine grievance seeds the process of revolt that the authorities fail to resolve. An opportunist capitalises on the state's oversight to muster support and widen the grievance, often for personal gain. It is important to note that the opportunist is motivated principally by greed but has strong incentives to couch this in terms of the grievance of the instigating group. The dynamic takes its own path from here on; the number and seriousness of the grievances multiply with the support base (Chand 2002:157).

Read in the broader context of Chand's discussion, one could reasonably assume that 'opportunist' is intended to refer to those who perpetrated the coup, ostensibly to seek redress for the grievances of Malaitians who

had been displaced from settlements on Guadalcanal.⁶ Certainly it was those who had been voted into the caretaker Sogavare government (and their MEF backers)—in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation—who were the biggest winners in the compensation saga.⁷ Furthermore, the Kemakeza government, though legitimately elected, nevertheless had strong connections with the MEF and its members continue to be implicated in illegal activities. Whether regarded as conspiracy or opportunism, the situation that ensued in the aftermath of the coup lends weight to the thesis that it was strongly motivated by economic, as well as purely political, agendas.⁸ Another direct outcome of the coup is that it returned to power a group of politicians who had grown used to the spoils of corruption in the forestry industry for much of the 1980s and 1990s. Fraenkel argues that it was these men who initiated the MEF, whilst another politician, Ezekiel Alebua, initiated the Isatabu militants.

Insurgent movements, such as the Isatabu and Eagle forces, may have attracted a groundswell of under-employed youths from Guadalcanal and Malaita, but both were initiated by ex-national politicians who found in them convenient new weapons to deploy in their challenges to the government of the day. In both cases, the younger commanders and foot-soldiers who had been summoned up from the streets or villages soon became deeply disenchanted when they saw the fruits of their pyrrhic victories (Fraenkel 2004:186).

According to the 'opposition conspiracy' thesis, the reformist Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) government presented an unacceptable challenge to a powerful coalition of vested interests, including politicians, public servants, Asian logging companies and criminals. Unable to

obtain numbers for a parliamentary vote of no confidence, these vested interests sought to stir up trouble on Guadalcanal in order to create a situation in which a coup would be seen as legitimate. According to Ulufa'alu, the 'militancy option' had been in place since the early 1990s, and would have been used to depose then Prime Minister Billy Hilili in 1994 had he not been forced to resign as a consequence of a number of defections from his cabinet.⁹ From Ulufa'alu's perspective, militancy has for some time been regarded by some elements within Solomon Island's state and society as a reserve option when democratic processes fail.¹⁰

There would appear to be some merit to this argument, at least as it relates to the coup. Fry, reflecting on similarities between the coups in Fiji and Solomon Islands, states

...in both coups we note the importance of the middle class businessmen and politicians whose personal wealth and status are tied up with who controls the state....In the Solomon Islands, as in Fiji, the Ulufa'alu Government was introducing anti-corruption regulations which would upset established business connections (Fry 2000:302).

Indeed, the SIAC Government's Policy and Structural Reform Program, a mix of home-grown and donor-inspired initiatives, went much further than tackling corruption (Bennett 2000). The government reduced the number of government ministries, downsized the public service by 10 per cent, and implemented significant reforms in the long-suffering forestry sector, including the drafting of a new Forestry Act and the establishment of a Forestry Board and a Forestry Trust. These reforms

...would have not only reduced the logging quota to a more sustainable level, but also would have seen much more regulation of the industry (Bennett 2002:10).¹¹



Class, ethnicity, culture and history

Whilst economic agendas may explain some aspects of the conflict in Solomon Islands, there were clearly many other factors at play. The causes of the original Isatabu uprising, which saw the violent eviction of over 35,000, mostly Malaitan, settlers from their homes around Honiara and on the Guadalcanal Plains, appear to have much to do with long-standing and deep-seated grievances concerning land, access to employment opportunities, the distribution of the benefits of development projects, and cultural differences between settler and landowning groups. Although there was widespread looting and ransacking of abandoned houses and government and commercial infrastructure, no attempt was made to take over the operation of the Gold Ridge mine, nor the oil palm and cocoa plantations of the Guadalcanal Plains.

Moreover, whilst it is easy to dismiss the professed objectives of the MEF-backed coup, people from Malaita have a long list of grievances concerning their historical isolation from development opportunities and their mistreatment at the hands of both colonial and post-colonial governments. The situation on Guadalcanal is further complicated by both intra and inter-group conflict concerning land and the distribution of the rents and royalties that flow from it. Whilst many of these disputes would appear to be motivated by greed, in the Melanesian context they 'are interpreted locally in terms of traditional modes of distribution' (Banks 2005:190). As argued by Regan (2003) in the case of the Bougainville conflict, a central issue for many involved in the Solomon Islands conflict, particularly the young men who swelled the ranks of both the IFM and MEF, appears to be socioeconomic justice; receiving a 'fair' share of the proceeds of development, including better access to services, especially education.

The fact that many of these perceived socioeconomic injustices have occurred between different 'culture' groups enabled the conflict to take on a potent identity or ethnic dimension such that at times it resembled 'a civil war...mainly between Guadalcanal and Malaitan people' (Bennett 2002:1). Indeed, many would argue that conflict is most likely to occur in situations where class and ethnic cleavages overlap and reinforce one another. Larmour (1994:68), for example, employs this perspective in the case of the 1987 Fiji coups; and Wesley-Smith and Ogan (1992) see the coinciding boundaries of ethnicity, class and age as an important cause of the Bougainville conflict. Several commentators on the Solomon Islands' conflict regard ethnic differences as having been polarised around underlying economic inequalities, both real and perceived.¹²

It is beyond the scope of this article to present a detailed theoretical discussion of the concepts of class and ethnicity, nor is it the intention to review the often polemical debate concerning the respective roles of class and ethnicity as causes and drivers of conflict in Melanesia. With regard to class, it is suffice to say that Marxist accounts have their limitations in the Pacific context due to the continuing obscurity of societal and cultural structures, and the importance of the subsistence economy and customary forms of land tenure, which raise doubts about the central importance of the capitalist mode of production assumed by Marxist scholars (see Larmour 1992, 1994; Wesley-Smith and Ogan 1992). However, the notion of class is frequently synonymous with socioeconomic inequalities and disparities, and in this regard it remains a useful analytical concept.

With regard to ethnicity, few credible scholars subscribe to the primordialism of the populist 'ancient hatreds' perspective, which has characterised media portrayals of the conflict in Solomon Islands. However,



whilst most informed observers would regard ethnicity as more of a constructed—rather than a primordial—factor in the conflict, few attempt to situate their analyses in the ‘constructionist’ or ‘soft’ perspective of ethnic conflict directly (see Horowitz 1998 for a review of the typology). This perspective regards ethnic affiliations as problematic, malleable and easily manipulated: ‘they are a convenient resource to be manipulated by elites’ (de Soysa 2001:8). A notable exception is Reilly (2005), who discusses the ways in which identity construction has been a central feature of the armed rebellions in Fiji, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Reilly also notes that ‘ethnic identities are never static: indeed, they can be created to serve particular goals and ends’ (2005:4).¹³

There could be much to be gained in more closely examining the roles of socioeconomic inequalities and ethnicity as drivers of conflict in Solomon Islands. Judith Bennett’s expansive history, *Wealth of the Solomons* (1987), traces the division of Solomon Islanders into ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ as a consequence of early contact with European traders and the subsequent development and labour policies of the colonial administration. These historical inequalities had a strong ecological and geographical basis,

[b]ut some, especially in the eastern Solomons, were disadvantaged because their natural resources were scant or because they were remote from direct contact with traders. So anxious were many of these for the new goods that they traded years of their labour, the only commodity they had that the white man wanted (Bennett 1987:78).

In the early colonial period (from the 1900s to the 1920s) those areas with suitable environments, notably the western islands and the northeast plains of Guadalcanal, were privileged by the colonial administra-

tion for the key economic activity of the day, coconut plantation development. People from areas which were deemed unsuitable for plantation development, and which offered minimal prospects for small-scale cash cropping, had only one option for participating in the ‘new’ economy: to temporarily leave their homes in order to sell their labour on the plantations (Bennett 1987). Honiara was chosen as the new site for the capital after the Second World War because of its proximity to the Guadalcanal Plains, which were regarded as vastly more suitable for agricultural development projects than the environments of Tulagi and neighbouring islands in the Florida group (Bennett 2002:6). This area became

...a magnet for people seeking work and the majority were Malaitan—first for the large rice-growing projects of the 1960s and then the CDC oil palm project and small industries such as breweries and sawmills (Bennett 2002:13).

From 1997 until its closure during the conflict, the Gold Ridge mine to the east of Honiara was also a significant source of employment opportunities (Dinnen 2000).

The heavily populated island of Malaita has historically been one of the most disadvantaged parts of Solomon Islands. Of the 30,000 or so Solomon Islanders who were recruited between 1870 and 1910 to work on the sugarcane plantations of Queensland, Fiji and Samoa, and in the nickel mines of New Caledonia, more than 50 per cent came from Malaita (Corris 1973; Price with Baker 1976:2). The Weather Coast of Guadalcanal also shares many of the historical economic disadvantages of Malaita. Both places were isolated from the early trading and pre war plantation economies, leaving their populations no choice but to sell their labour during the blackbirding era and, subsequently, on plantations in other parts



of Solomon Islands. Similarly, after the War, large numbers of men from south Guadalcanal, as well as Malaita, went to work in and around Honiara and on the Guadalcanal Plains (Bennett 1987). As was the case with Malaitan migrants, these movements became increasingly permanent over the past 30 years or so.

This history of uneven development created a complex matrix of economic cleavages operating both between and within groups and at local and national levels. The history of settlement, land transactions, employment and economic activity on the Guadalcanal Plains is widely regarded as having created divisions between settler and landowner groups and also within landowning groups.¹⁴ However, there are also broader inequalities at play. Following Frazer (1997a, 1997b) and Scales (2004), a fundamental distinction can be made between the 'Honiara élite' and the vast majority of the population (around 85 per cent) who reside in rural areas (and also those who live in Honiara but are unemployed or hold poorly paid jobs). The urban élite consists of public servants, businessmen, professionals and, perhaps most importantly, national Members of Parliament. Contributions by Frazer (1997a, 1997b), Kabutaulaka (1997), Dauvergne (1998a, 1998b) and Bennett (2000) have documented the deepening collusion between foreign-owned logging companies and corrupt politicians, which has seen the over-exploitation of Solomon Islands' lucrative forestry resources over the past 20 years or so to the benefit of a miniscule Honiara-based élite.¹⁵ Moreover, as Scales demonstrates in the case of Western Province, the logging industry has also produced cleavages at the local level

...a cross-cutting stratification and fractionation of island society that drives the political emergence of new associations for island resources governance (2004:4).

After the Second World War, perceptions of socioeconomic inequality and neglect by the colonial administration fuelled the creation of island and area-wide ethnic solidarities. The Maasina Rule movement which emerged on Malaita immediately after the War rapidly expanded to include an estimated 96 per cent of Malaitans (Keesing 1982:359). A fundamental objective of the movement was to 'codify an agreed version of Malaitan *kastom* which the administration would have to accept as legitimate' (Keesing 1982:360). Another objective was to represent the interests of all Malaitans through 'collective bargaining' with the colonial government in regard to 'the terms of administration, plantation labour and law' (Keesing 1982:359). Frazer's (1990) analysis of Maasina Rule argues that it was concerned not only with anti-colonial nationalist objectives, but also with posing a 'working class' challenge to the inequities of the colonial plantation economy.

Similarly, the Moro movement—which appeared on the Weather Coast in the late 1950s—was formed in response to feelings of isolation and economic disadvantage brought about by years of neglect by the central government; frustrations that were compounded by the relative proximity of the region to Honiara. The movement's agenda was to seek 'a new order based on local self-sufficiency and a revival of old customs' (Bennett 1987:316). The recent conflict in the Solomon Islands also witnessed the re-emergence of a dormant secessionist movement in Western Province—where much of the commercial logging has taken place—which, according to Scales, had much to do with the distribution of the economic benefits of logging (2004).

Indeed, the recent conflict has also highlighted the ongoing influence of both the Maasina Rule and Moro movements. Commentators have drawn continuities

between the cultist and millenarianist aspects of these movements and the behaviour and apparel of militant groups during the conflict (Herlihy 2003; Moore 2004). It is these motivations, more than any other, which defy the rationality of economic models of conflict. According to Herlihy,

[r]itual and cultist activity during the crisis, of the more traditional type, was reported from both sides. Father Terry Brown, Bishop of Malaita, reported that there was certainly cultic activity by the IFM. Many of their fighters wore traditional Guadalcanal kabalato (loincloths) and a traditional string around the neck (like the Moro Movement). They used various forms of magic to make themselves immune from gunfire... There was certainly some cultic activity by MEF—some use of traditional sacrifice, magic, etc. The founder of the phallus-worshipping 'Only You' sect in Honiara in the eighties joined the MEF and was said to collect Guadalcanal skulls for his shrine in bush above Honiara. He displayed some in the Auki market (Herlihy 2003:25–26).

Conclusion

It would appear that a modified version of the greed thesis of intrastate conflict has some resonances with particular aspects of the conflict in Solomon Islands. It has been seen that a range of actors benefited financially from the corruption and criminality that characterised the post coup phase of the conflict. Moreover, it seems likely that economic agendas were a motivating force behind the coup itself. While there are allegations of illegal logging and the improper granting of logging concessions during the course of the conflict, the economic

predation was predominantly on the state itself, particularly through the corrupted compensation process. The post coup situation has been described by some commentators as akin to the 'instrumentalisation of disorder', which characterises conflict in certain African contexts (Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2004). This perspective sees political élites and their armed clients as having a vested economic interest in the promulgation and prolongation of violence and disorder.

However, it has also been argued that economic factors alone cannot fully account for the origins and dynamics of the conflict. The reasons individuals participate in collective violence cannot be reduced to mere greed and economic self-interest. In the case of the conflict in Solomon Islands, class and ethnicity are influences which transcend the 'myth of rational choice individualism' and inform the 'social and historical features of change' highlighted in the 'beyond greed and grievance' literature (Cramer 2002:1,857). As has been the case with other recent armed conflicts in Melanesia, ethnicity or identity became polarised around underlying issues of socioeconomic justice, both real and perceived.

To understand the ways in which these inequalities and identities have developed we must look into the history of Solomon Islands from the early contact period. Ecological and geographic expediencies meant that particular parts of the archipelago were privileged first by the early European traders and later by the development policies of the colonial administration. Two of the areas that are central to the conflict, the island of Malaita and the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, are perhaps the most underdeveloped and historically neglected parts of Solomon Islands. In the post war period, people from these and other areas repeatedly voiced their grievances at what



they regarded as injustices at the hands of both colonial and post-colonial governments, particularly in regard to the distribution of the benefits of development. These grievances have been compounded by the emergence of an élitist post-colonial political culture, which, for the most part, has been closely associated with the notoriously corrupt logging industry. While the militant groups quickly fractured after the Townsville Peace Agreement, and struggled to maintain cohesion even before then, the conflict in Solomon Islands was nevertheless characterised by a polarisation of ethnic identities along a confrontational 'us versus them' axis.

There is considerable scope for further analysis of the causes and dynamics of the conflict in Solomon Islands. An important issue that has not been discussed here is the 'demonstration effect' of the Bougainville conflict. Over 9,000 people from Bougainville came into the Solomon Islands during the course of the Bougainville conflict (1988–98), with most of them settling on Guadalcanal for long periods of time. Kabutaulaka argues that the Bougainvilleans would have shared with the Guadalcanal people their story of evicting the 'hated "redskins" (PNG Highlanders)' from their island and shutting down one of the world's largest copper mines (2001:17). One wonders how these stories affected the motivations of the young Isatabu militants. Indeed, the voices of the young men who swelled the ranks of both the IFM and MEF remain conspicuously absent in the academic discourse on the conflict. This is unfortunate because it is, after all, the greed of men such as these that is said to drive violent conflict in developing nations throughout the world.

Notes

- ¹ Whilst acknowledging the difficulties inherent in attempting to identify 'culture areas', following Knauff (1999:1), Melanesia is delineated as the region stretching from New Caledonia in the southeast to the island of New Guinea in the northwest. Included are the post-colonial nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, the French colony of New Caledonia and the Indonesian province of West Papua.
- ² In the case of Solomon Islands, it appears that both processes are at work (see Fraenkel 2004:184). In the mid 1990s, limited secondary school places meant that 6,000–7,500 students per year left the education system at the primary school level. Moreover, whilst 1,000–1,500 secondary school graduates were entering the labour market each year, the number of new jobs was only expanding at around 700 per year. However, there are other possible sources of rising youth expectations that are thought to be important in the case of Solomon Islands. Ted Gurr discusses these as 'demonstration effects' (1970:92). Most are the consequence of the increasing exposure of non-Western peoples to the material culture of the West as a result of modernisation, urbanisation and internal migration. According to Gurr, '...exposure to modernisation raises expectations for welfare and interpersonal values—economic goods, personal development, status, the pleasures of urban social life. The demonstration effect also operates with respect to power values' (1970:97).
- ³ In an earlier article, Regan gives greater emphasis to the role of criminal motives amongst elements of the BRA: 'The strongest support came from frustrated young men with few economic opportunities for whom membership of the BRA gave power and status. There was considerable continuity between criminal activity by *raskols* and BRA activity' (Regan 1998:277).
- ⁴ This has led Ware (2004) to refer to the Bougainville conflict as 'the only green civil war' and one that therefore cannot be explained through the use of econometric

models. Unfortunately, Ware restricts her exploration of the youth bulge thesis in the Pacific to the Bougainville conflict (because she does not see the Solomon Islands case as qualifying as an armed conflict).

⁵ During the period of the conflict the production and export of all primary export commodities declined but, proportionately, log exports declined the least and recovered the most rapidly (Central Bank of Solomon Islands 2005). In 2003, the value of log exports exceeded pre-conflict levels, which lends some weight to allegations that several new logging concessions were awarded after the coup in 'back-door' dealings (Seminar presented by Bartholomew Ulufa'alu at The Australian National University, 15 July 2004; taped interview with B. Ulufa'alu, 25 July 2004; personal communication, Tony Jansen, 10 September 2004). It has also been alleged that illegal logging activities increased during the period of the conflict (UNDP 2004).

⁶ Alternatively, the opportunist could be Ezekiel Alebua who was the Premier of Guadalcanal Province when the troubles began in late 1998. Whilst Alebua's involvement in the origins of the violence remains unclear, it is alleged by some, including Weather Coast militants, that he almost single-handedly orchestrated the uprising. According to Fraenkel: 'A more plausible conspiracy theory—backed, for example, by Police Commissioner Frank Short—was that Guadalcanal provincial leaders, and in particular Guadalcanal premier Ezekiel Alebua, had planned the rural eviction campaign together with key GRA militant leaders, including Harold Keke and Joe Sangu, at a meeting held at the Tamba Resort in March 1998' (2004:64).

⁷ Note, however, that the Sogavare government's 'chequebook approach to peace making' saw the dispensation of 'compensation' payments to provincial and militant representatives from both Malaita and Guadalcanal (Dinnen 2002:289). Similarly, numerous parties benefited from the 'peace dividend' of the Townsville Peace Accord in October 2000, including Guadalcanal militants and politicians, Marau fighters (representing

the Are'are speaking peoples of Marau Sound in eastern Guadalcanal, whose ancestors originated from Malaita) and the MEF Supreme Command (Fraenkel 2004b:105). However, again it was the political and militant elements of the MEF who benefited the most from the Townsville Peace Accord: 'Its provisions reflected the interests of the militant groups above all else and, in particular, those of the more powerful MEF and its political and business associates' (Dinnen 2002:291).

⁸ According to Fraenkel, 'the coup was less about *capturing* state power and more about *ransacking* the state' [original emphases] (2004:106).

⁹ Like the SIAC government, Francis Billy Hilly's National Coalition Partnership (NCP) was attempting to reform the long-suffering forestry industry, which had become so corrupted under the governments of Solomon Mamaloni (for details of the reforms see Frazer 1997a, 1997b; Dauvergne 1998, 1998/99; Bennett 2000). The NCP barely had a chance to implement the reform program before it was brought down by a series of cabinet resignations and defections in October 1994. It was later proven that five cabinet ministers of the NCP government had defected to join Mamaloni's Solomon Islands National Unity and Reconciliation Party (SINURP) after receiving bribes from a Honiara businessman (Kabutaulaka 1997:488). Once in office, the SINURP government immediately set about dismantling the reform program and it was quickly back to business as usual for Mamaloni, who was the director of a logging company, and his ministers, most of whom were also involved in the logging industry (Frazer 1997a, 1997b).

¹⁰ Seminar presented at the Australian National University, 15 July 2004; taped interview with B. Ulufa'alu, 25 July 2004.

¹¹ The present status of the reform of the forestry sector is unclear. Ulufa'alu alleges that Asian logging companies actually expanded their logging concession areas during the 'crisis' (taped interview); and it appears that the new Forestry Act is yet to be debated by Parliament.



- ¹² Fry presents the perspective that the democratic system had been 'captured by middlemen...who could manipulate the system for their own interests but whose interests were served by playing on ethnic division' (2000:300–1). Reilly (2005) finds a similar process, which he calls 'identity construction', at play in the Bougainville conflict and the Fiji coups, as well as in the Solomon Island's conflict.
- ¹³ Measuring ethnic diversity is problematic. Reilly (2005) employs language as a readily quantifiable measure, which can be used for comparative purposes in the South Pacific context. Following this logic, there are at least seven languages spoken on Guadalcanal and ten on Malaita, with a total of more than 80 across the whole of the archipelago (Wurm and Hattori 1981, cited in Dinnen 2002:285). However, the true number of ethnic groups is arguably greater than this as many of the languages have multiple dialects and, at least in pre-contact times, different groups sharing the same the language lacked 'political cohesion' and were frequently 'at odds with one another' (Bennett 1987:6).
- ¹⁴ This history is examined in some depth by Fraenkel (2004). The internecine conflict referred to here is intergenerational conflict within Guadalcanal landowning groups. The present generation of young men feel that, in selling land rights to settlers, their fathers squandered their inheritance (see Kabutalaka 2002). This situation is reminiscent of the origins of the Bougainville conflict (as observed by Dinnen 2002), where intergenerational disputes within Nasioi landowning groups concerning royalty payments from the Panguna mine are thought to have sparked the initial violence (Filer 1990; Regan 1998, 2003). Another important dispute on Guadalcanal concerns the claims of Weather Coast people as the 'true true' landowners of all of Guadalcanal. According to Brown, 'customary land ownership of the [Gold Ridge] mine is still disputed...with Weather Coast people continuing to exert their claims' (2003:4).
- ¹⁵ Frazer characterises the nature of the logging industry since independence in 1978 as 'a barely controlled form of mining sanctioned

by a section of the ruling élite for their own benefit and in the short-term interests of the post-colonial state' (1997a:318).

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